



Western Circuit Women's Forum



By **Kate Brunner QC**



The first woman to be called to the Bar, Ivy Williams, came from the heart of the West Country, and many have followed in her footsteps in the 94 years since: there are now nearly 300 women practising on the Western Circuit. Whilst there is no problem attracting women to the Bar on any Circuit, there is a deeply entrenched problem with retention and advancement. Women make up 50 per cent of barristers called to the Bar, but that percentage drops sharply over the years so that women make up a total of 35 per cent of the practising Bar and only 6 per cent of barristers over 22 years' Call. One of the obvious effects of the poor retention rate is that, despite radical overhauls to the process of selecting silks and judges, we are far from equal representation of women at QC and judicial level, and representation on the Western Circuit lags behind the national average. A recent study suggests that at the present rate of change, equality may never be achieved.

The Western Circuit is not known for its pessimism, and so we are launching the Western Circuit Women's Forum to confront the stubborn statistics. The principle objectives of this Forum are to ensure that every junior female barrister on our Circuit who wishes to remain at the Bar is supported in doing so, and that those barristers who have aspirations to apply for silk or to become a judge are helped and encouraged.

A recent qualitative investigation by the Bar Council (*Snapshot: the Experience of Self-Employed Women at the Bar*) identified that women's experiences at the Bar remain significantly – and perhaps surprisingly – different to men's. The study identified differences in the type of work women are briefed to do, and differences in the challenges faced when progressing a career. Some are challenges specific to a career at the Bar, and some are challenges which face women in many professions. Two of the recommendations of that study were to put in place mentoring schemes and to make senior female role models more visible. With this in mind, the Western Circuit Women's Forum is, with enormous support from members of Circuit across the south-west, identifying a mentor for every female member of Circuit under ten years' Call. The Forum will be formally launched in autumn 2016, and thereafter will organise and moderate events for women barristers and disseminate information relating to return to work and other issues. The Temple Women's Forum has proved an important resource for barristers in London, and it is hoped that the Western Circuit Women's Forum can emulate that success. For more information on the scheme, please contact Kate Brunner QC at wcf@westerncircuit.co.uk.

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